THE WOMAN WITH THE ODD NECK

BY BEN HECHT

A woman possessing more than one person's share of physical deformities goes to live in a town where ignorance and superstition are conspicuous features. She is looked upon as the advance agent of famine, flood, pestilence and higher tax rates.

TWO weeks after she came to our village we tried to drive her out. She had moved into the little frame house at the end of Monument Street,—our haunted house. Four of our trustees called upon her. They were men who had been born in our village and they had taken the matter of Frieda Heffner into their own hands.

She was a strange old woman, gnarled and misshapen. Our trustees told her that the village did not want her and said they would pay her fare back to the city. They told her the Board was figuring on tearing down the house into which she had moved.

"No good ever came of that house, Miss," said Amos Case, who was a short red-faced man who owned the livery stable. "Tim Donahue who sold the house to you is lying out there in the back yard. He buried himself and how he did it nobody knows. And furthermore you don't look like a woman who belongs and is necessary to this village."

The three trustees with Amos shuffled uncomfortably on their feet. I was one of them. We all tried to keep from looking at Frieda. She was a strange old woman, twisted and with something horrible about her.

There had been a meeting in the Hall a week after Frieda had moved into our haunted house. This house had always been a sore spot in our village. It stood alone at the end of a little road we called Monument Street, a half-rotted, overgrown little house with ugly blotches on its walls. There were elm trees and wild looking bushes around it and the raindrip from the leaves had rotted the roof away. The windows upstairs were boarded and downstairs they were broken and patched. Wild things grew in what had been the yard. At night the old house rattled and moaned and people disliked to pass it. About thirty years ago a man named Sam Gifford had killed his wife in the house. He was taken to the county seat and hanged. But for years afterward people said they saw him sitting behind the broken windows.

Then Tim Donahue came to live with us. He was a strange old man who was always drunk and muttering to himself. He came into the village once a month and he was seldom seen at any other time. He stayed in the house day and night and people wondered what he did in there. At night he would sit by the broken window, his white face and red beard framed in the dismal moonlight which shimmered on the house through the dank elms.

One day we saw Tim digging in his back yard. It was mentioned at the store, but nobody paid any attention to it at the time. A few days after he came to the city hall and had a bill of sale recorded. We saw him go back to the house, shuffling down the dusty road and turning around to look at the village with a queer grin every few hundred feet. After he had been missing for two months three of us went to the house to see what had happened to him. We found the house empty, reeking with strange, humid odors. The walls were dripping, and the stains had crawled across the floor consuming the wood and the iron in their wet. Remembering the hole he had been digging in the back yard we went out and dug it up. About five feet underground lay what was

left of Tim Donahue. He had buried himself without a coffin and he looked horrible when we scraped off the earth.

There was some talk about tearing down the house and removing the remains, but nothing ever came of that. Then one day six months later somebody discovered that the house was occupied. Clint Davies was driving in with some milk cans when he saw a strange old woman sitting at a window looking out at the road.

We saw her in the village soon after when she came in to buy supplies of Tom Hunter at the store. She was queer. She walked with a cane although she was neither bent nor lame. Her body was thin and straight and when we watched her walking down Main Street the first time we noticed that she had a habit of stopping and rising on her tiptoes now and then. But the thing about her that made folks stare was her neck and the color of her face. She was old and looked like a woman who had always been old. But there were no wrinkles in her face and her skin was an ashen blue, a lifeless color with a dead gloss over it. And she kept her head on one side as if she were peering at something with her right eye. Her left eye was closed almost tight and as she walked along she appeared to be squinting at the roofs. When she came into the store, Tom Hunter stared at her. I was sitting at the end of the counter. She asked for some bacon and eggs and bread. Her voice was husky and you could hardly hear what she said. While she talked she kept her head cocked over, her eye squinting at the ceiling and not looking at anything else. I saw she had a queer scar on the side of her neck that was stretched. It was a live scar that glowed red when she talked.

Tom Hunter kept turning around to look at her while he gathered together her order. Our village is off the main road a long way and there are a lot of things which our folks believe in that sound foolish when they're mentioned in the city. When the old woman left the store with her packages she stopped in the doorway and suddenly rose on her toes, her head over on one side, her eye cocked on the ceiling and the scar on her neck burning like a sore. Tom Hunter was born in our village and he crossed himself. He remembered Sam Gifford, the murderer, and often he'd told me things about the lonely blind roads that lie in the woods around our village.

"No good is going to come of that old hag," he said, "Now mark my words."

It was not more than a few days after that that folks began to talk about Frieda Heffner—that was her name according o the bill of sale Tim Donahue had made out before burying himself. The women said she was a witch and warned their children not to go near the house after dark.

When Amos Case finished talking to Frieda the day we went to drive her out of the village, she laughed. Her mouth when she laughed became twisted into a queer lop-sided grin that made her look as if the side of her face against her shoulder was paralysed.

"Get out o' here," she said. "Leave me alone if you know what's good."

She waved her cane at the four of us and, still squinting up at the ceiling, while the red scar on her neck glowed brighter than ever, she pushed us out of the house.

"I won't bother you," she called after us, "if you don't bother me. I'm an old woman and I want to be let alone."

We walked away and I turned to look back at her. I noticed how straight her arms hung down by her sides as she stood in the doorway. I said to Tom Hunter, "Look at her, would you!"

He turned and looked.

"Did you ever see anybody stand so straight?" I said.

"Lord," said Hunter, "she's standing on her tip toes!"

Things got worse after that. The women in our village began to tell stories about Frieda. They said she went out at night to the cemetery that was further on down Monument Street, and they said that strange noises had been heard from inside the old house after dark. Now and then someone came driving in from Gillport with another tale of what he'd heard in passing the black elms that hid the

place where Frieda lived. The boys soon broke all the windows and plastered the wall with mud. Once they tried to set fire to the house, but it rained and put the fire out.

One night, a month after our delegation had visited Frieda, I was walking down Monument Street. I had been over to the widow Baker's home and had stayed till nine o'clock. It was dark. There was no moon. The road was full of dead leaves that rustled and jumped under my feet. When I came in front of the house that stood at the end of Monument Street I stopped. There was no light inside but I heard strange noises. It was somebody groaning and every once in a while crying out in a shriek. The wind was blowing and I thought perhaps I was imagining it. I listened to the trees whipping against the roof and the grass whistling shrilly all around me. Things fell in gusts upon the dark shape of the house and the boards that had been placed over the empty windows rattled and creaked and the leaves moaned dismally as they brushed the walls. But I heard the voice growing louder, bursting through the howling of the wind.

I thought perhaps Frieda was sick and I stood trembling. I decided finally to go into the dark house and see. Nobody answered my knock at the door, so I opened it and entered.

The room was black but I could make out a figure crouching in the middle of the floor. I struck a match and saw Frieda. She sat up straight in the ghastly flicker, her lop-sided mouth stretched wide open and her right eye cocked in horror at the ceiling. She was groaning and shrieking. The match went out, and I jumped and called out to her, "What's the matter? Can I do anything for you?"

Her groans grew worse and I found another match and lighted that and then lighted a lamp on a table. In the dim yellow gleam of the lamp her face turned itself toward me and she stood up. I waited for her to come at me but she remained motionless, her eye still cocked at the ceiling. I saw her rise to her tip toes and stand strained with her arms hanging loose at her sides and the scar on her neck glowing red.

Then she fell down on the floor and I went over and picked her up and took her into another room where there was a bed. She seemed to be asleep so I went away. When I got outside of the house I ran. The lamp had gone out and the house crouched behind me in the darkness.

I did not say anything to anybody but the next morning early I went back and found her eating her breakfast alone. She seemed to be glad to see me and asked me to sit down.

"You came in here last night," she said, "and were nice to me."

She reached out her hand and patted mine. Her hand was cold and the fingers were long and ashen blue. I shivered.

"You were sick last night," I told her. And then I noticed she was crying.

"You're the only one," she said, "who's been nice to me. They've broken all my windows and when they see me in the street they run from me and call me names. I don't dare go out in the daytime because they throw stones at me, so I have to walk in the night."

I felt sorry for her because she was crying and despite her twisted neck and her lop-sided mouth and the color of her face I felt that there was something pitiful about her and I was no longer afraid. I said to her as kindly as I could:

"You ought to go away. The people in our village aren't very broad. They think there's something wrong with you and they're afraid. And besides they don't like your house."

Frieda dried her eyes and still squinting at the ceiling she rubbed the long, stretched side of her neck and began to talk in a low, hoarse voice.

"It hurts me today," she said, "it always hurts me after I've been sick like that. I'll tell you because you ain't a terrible fool like the others. I ain't going to leave this house because I've come here to die. I've been moving from one place to another all my life. They don't let me stay anywhere. They keep driving me away because I look like this and

frighten them and their children. I'm queer. I was born like this with my head twisted and that sore on my neck and my face like this. I had to grow up alone because nobody would play with me. Nobody would marry me when I got older. I've been alone in houses like this all the time. My father kept me in a Home and when he died I got his money and I've been trying to find some place to live. I keep getting sicker all the time, I do, with spells like you saw last night. I can't remember them afterward, but something happens to me that makes me afraid and hurts me and I groan and holler out. I used to have the spells when I was a girl and I've always had 'em. Now they come pretty nearly every night. People have called me a witch and said I'm sold to the devil and said he's twisted me out of shape and put his mark on me. But it ain't so. That's the way I was born and I never meant no harm. But I've always been like this and the doctors don't know what it is, and I'm going to die here."

Frieda stopped talking and moaned. I went away feeling sorry for her, but I didn't go back for a long time. The folks in our village became somewhat used to her although they kept saying no good would come of her and that if the trustees were men they would drive her out and pull the house down.

We had a lot of sickness in our village that fall and this made things bad again. Widow Baker lost one of her girls, and two of Ned Lockwood's boys caught the sickness and one of them died. Old man Meyer died and we had a doctor up from the county seat who said it was a typhoid epidemic. Folks began to blame Frieda.

"The old hag's revenging herself by killing us off," they said, and the talk about driving her out grew serious. When Amos Case got the fever and died things came to a head. There was a meeting in the Hall one night late in October, and after the meeting twenty of the men and a few women started for the house at the end of Monument Street. They carried buckets of tar and a lot of feathers and a long rail ripped off Case's fence.

It was cold and dark and a few of the men in the lead carried lanterns. They walked without talking. I saw there was no use saying or doing anything, so I just followed along with them.

We reached the house and found it dark. There was no sound from inside. The wind was bending the elms down over the roof and shaking the loose things on the house. The empty windows stared out blacker than the night and the place looked dead in the darkness,—dead, with ugly shadows burying it.

The posse walked up the steps and opened the door. The first man in carried a lantern that he held up in front of his face. But when he looked into the room he dropped it and turned around and yelled:

"For God's sake, let me out!"

The men behind him moved back a little but the women yelled, "Go on! Go on! Let's get her!"

There was a lot of noise and excitement, voices and oaths and shrieks. But the house inside remained dark and silent. And then somebody noticed that the house was afire. The flames were creeping in thin bright lines around the door and glowing blue around the windows. The wind came with a gust and the old house suddenly became a torch, and in the great glare of yellow light which burst into the blackness we saw Frieda hanging by a rope that was hitched to the ceiling. And we rushed across the road and stood looking without a sound.

We saw that the rope around her neck was knotted over the scar and that her head was bent the same way as when she was alive, with her right eye opened in horror and squinting at the ceiling. She seemed just as she had seemed when she used to stand on tip toes with her arms hanging straight down and her head bent and her neck stretched. But now there was nothing strange about her, nothing misshapen. She looked as she had always looked with her face ashen blue in the great glare of the flames; but for the first time she looked natural and all of us understood something.

The roaring flames licked at the rope and she disappeared.